

STELLA NEWTON

24 July 1903 – 1 July 2007

The Newton family has lost its Matriarch, the aristocratic career woman, socialite, church worker and carer of her aged parents, Stella – or as she would be known to most of us here today, Aunt Stella. She died just a few weeks short of her 104th birthday.

Of her pioneer generation, only one is left – Gillie the second youngest, who's now 95. A long life is a Newton trait – although it causes some of us to worry that our superannuation may run out before we do. But old age comes as a shock to those who lead an active and productive life. I will never forget a conversation I had with Aunt Stella when she turned 90. She was saddened by the thought that her mind was as active as it ever was, but her body was falling apart. Her eyesight was fading, and her knees were crumbling. I remember her words vividly "It's no fun growing old".

The dynasty of Newtons will no doubt survive, scattered widely among the offspring of only five of the nine sons and daughters of John Thomas Newton and Elizabeth Ann Nash.

Stella never married, although she was indeed wooed during the war years when General McArthur had 40,000 of his troops camped in and around Rockhampton. I've seen photos and little notes from American medical corps officers, referring to Stella as "The Kid". It's a little hard to imagine. But it was without doubt an exciting time for young, single ladies who were invited to dances, beach and riverside picnics. The little house in Archer Street behind the Masonic Hall saw many American uniforms – and I've got the photographs to prove it. I was even there for some of the action and us kids were regularly featured in photographs with yankee officers who bribed us, and the ladies, with chocolate and chewing gum.

There is no doubt that Stella was the belle of the ball, and those early photographs show vivacious and well presented sisters, Stella, Elsie and Dorrie posing beside jeeps, sitting on fences, on the steps at Archer Street and on river boats.

As a young woman, already well entrenched in a business career at Walter Reid and Co, Stella was a very stylish and social young lady.

She dressed well, mixed in the very best of company and was admired by her employers, her church (later the Wandal Uniting Church where she became an Elder), her bridge club and her social set.

She became the family Matriarch by default. We have plenty of evidence, from her own lips in fact, that she refused to chase after men.

Two well published stories demonstrate this:

Stella, when interviewed by the Bulletin when she turned 93, said that when she first started working at Walter Reid and Co, 'young chaps subjected her to the high-jinks of stealing her ribbons and running away with them.'

'I quickly worked out,' she was quoted as saying, 'that they would bring them back and talk to me if I didn't chase them.'

Stella was an avid cricket fan, and her exploits at the time Don Bradman came to town were much publicised. It was the summer of 1930, and sports mad Queenslanders flocked to Rockhampton in trains and buses to watch a country eleven take on the visiting New South Wales team.

Before the match a dinner dance in honour of the visitors was staged. And Stella remarked that girls would have given anything to dance with Bradman.

At the match, Stella, then 27, got herself a seat on the fence just metres from where Bradman stood in the outfield. Quite early in the day, he dived for a ball and remained sprawled on the turf. He was in severe pain, with what turned out to be a broken ankle. While other girls tried to visit Bradman in hospital, Stella decided not to. She had never chased a man and she wasn't going to start now, the Sunday Mail reported in the 1997 story. It went on to say 'Today she is still single, has a sharp memory and is still an avid cricket follower.'

When it became obvious that she would chose not to marry, she devoted her life to being the matriarch of the family and looking after her ageing parents.

I looked up the meaning of matriarch - a woman who is recognised as being the head of a family, who is highly respected by her family and to whom the family turns for advice and help – a woman who holds a position of dominance, authority, or respect.

She was dominant, and she had authority, that's for sure. At Walter Reid, girls who dared to wear short skirts to work were sent home to change into something more appropriate to a professional office.

My cousin Eunice recalls another time when her Dad, Alf, called Stella to see if she could help find a job for Eunice's son. Not only did she not believe in hiring family members at the firm, but anyway, 'his hair was too long'.

I think we can thank Stella for keeping the Newton family connected, even if, eventually, they had all scattered to the winds.

My childhood memories which I am sure could be repeated by many of you here today, are of obligatory Sunday visits to the Newton house, first in Archer Street and then back at Wandal Road.

Aunt Stella went out of her way to maintain contact with everyone from her generation and my generation, and she took a continuing interest in marriages and offspring, right up till the time when she could do it no more. She liked to think that everyone was successful, and she favoured those who she considered were 'making something of their lives'. She offered encouragement and advice through countless letters and cards.

Stella ruled with authority. Her word was law, but she was far from unkind. I remember one of my meetings when Stella was in her eighties and I was around middle age, and I rather stupidly thought I could get away with greeting her as just "Stella". She corrected me immediately, "Aunt Stella to you".

If she was admired by her family – and she was, she was feared by her fellow employees. When I began work as a reporter, the Walter Reid company was on my regular news beat, and I got a sadistic thrill when I called in to the front counter and demanded to see Miss Newton. When the receptionist was told that I was also a Newton, an ominous silence settled over the typing pool, which comprised scores of young women in the big open plan ground floor offices of Walter Reid.

Stella would be told of my presence, and as she strode down the centre aisle of typists and secretaries, you could almost see them shrinking low in their chairs, hiding behind their big black typewriters, avoiding her eyes, trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

I usually find historic dates a little boring, but I think in the context of this grand lady's life, we all need a short history lesson.

- In 1892, John Thomas Newton and Elizabeth Ann Nash married at Barcaldine
- Their first child, Ivy Edith was born just a little while later, three months later to be precise...you draw your own conclusions
- Francis Ruth was born in 1895 – she died soon after
- Elsie Vera was born in 1897 – she still holds the record for longevity – 105
- Alfred John was born in 1899
- Stella was born on 24 July 1903
- Dorothy Lillian was born in 1906
- Wesley Thomas was born in 1908
- Gilbert Horace was born in 1912
- And Agnes Frances Isabel was born in 1915

Stella was born in Mt Morgan and as a young girl spent a lot of time caring for her younger siblings, helping a little around her father's watchmaking and jewellery shop in the main street, and trudging up the hill to her grandparent's boarding house to help out. Her grandparents were James and Frances, the founders of the Australian dynasty of Newtons, who had moved to Mt Morgan from Rockhampton after running the big wheelwright and coach repair business in Kent Street for a quarter of a century.

Stella recalls seeing her grandmother making mats out of sugar bags and edged with material to give to family members as presents at Christmas, and of the celebrations at the boarding house, she recalled that the table was not cleared for a fortnight.

Stella moved to Rockhampton with her parents in 1915 and won a scholarship to attend the Girls Grammar School.

She joined Walter Reid and Co at the age of 15 and continued working there until she was about 70.

When she turned 100, she was quoted in the local newspaper as saying that hard work was the key to a long life, although she admitted she wouldn't want to do it again.

Stella was the last to leave the family home at 89 Wandal Road. The house would have been purchased by her parents prior to 1918, because our father remembers that when peace was declared in 1918, he celebrated by banging the side of a kerosene tin as part of the celebrations and a huge procession was held.

Wandal was sparsely settled when the family moved there originally, and there were only three houses in the block, including the Mathews and the Klaproths. The Newton children played across the open paddocks and along the banks of the river.

Jardine's lagoon was a favourite spot. It was a pretty place, with water lilies and birds and the kids swam and fished there.

The house faced the lagoon, and behind them was an avenue of tamarind trees, once known as the gateway to Jardine's manor. The two big bottle trees which dominated the front yard for so many years, were believed to originally mark the entrance to the manor.

At Walter Reid, Stella became the confidant and personal friend of the owners and managers, the most famous of these being the manager, Mac Scott and the Rudd family, which owned the big trading company. In a hand written note to Stella in 1958, Frank Rudd, the son of a Walter Reid founder said "May you long continue to serve under the banner of W. R. and Co. You will be the first to know when you are not up to the job - then will be time enough to part. I think Miss Rivers and yourself are the only two of the old school left with us. You may yet see the fourth generation of Rudds at the helm."

On 10 May 1969, the executive staff gathered at the Crystal Diner to celebrate her 50 years with the company. Mac Scott, the company manager, presented Stella with a cheque....we don't know how much.

Although we don't know what her actual job was, it was obvious that Stella was the equivalent of today's Personal Assistant to the Manager. She was well known and well connected. The telegrams poured in for her 50th anniversary with the company, from the likes of Rockhampton's founders, the Archer family of Gracemere, and Mark Hinchliff, the well spoken Englishman who was the direct representative of the Lord Vesty organisation which owned Lakes Creek back then.

Aunt Stella went exploring rather late in life. Before she left Walter Reids, she had purchased her first car, a mini minor, and had one of the men at Reids teach her to drive. On her departure from the company, Mac Scott gave her the keys to a brand new Ford Escort.

Thank God she was an Elder in her church, for it was divine providence which protected her in that car, certainly not her driving skills.

She drove that little white car anywhere and everywhere. On one trip, the car ran into an embankment and overturned. Stella and her three female passengers crawled out and just kept on walking.

Stella loved travel and loved people. She travelled around many parts of Australia, and then went to Europe, Japan and America. Judging from the postcards and letters she sent to her friends and relations, these trips were the real highlights of her life.

We will all have our own recollections and stories from the Aunt Stella years and I believe that those of you who knew her, understood her and loved her, will take those memories to your own graves.

She left an indelible stamp on all of us, and by simply being herself, she instilled within us her final instruction 'Don't you ever forget me'. And we won't, Aunt Stella.

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